



CONNECTIONS

'I Miss the Sky'

BY KATHERINE JAMIESON

The envelopes stamped “religious material” arrive in my post office box once or twice a month. In handwriting blocky or scrawled — and once in an ornate cursive that looked like it could grace an illuminated manuscript — prisoners from around the country write to me about meditation and Buddhism. Among stories of grief and regret, brutality and faith, I see again and again the radiating coal of one burning question: *How can I quiet my mind?*

Our epistolary relationship is hopelessly antiquated but offers an intimacy I appreciate. As billions of text messages whiz back and forth across this wired planet, these men scrounge for pens or pencils and sheets of paper ripped from notebooks, then wait months for my response. When I hold their letters, I know something of them: how they plow through margins using every inch of paper real estate, the feathery touch or deep press of their ink against the page. Handwriting is an embodied form of communication, reflecting a human being, a mind. Through this paper that still holds traces of their DNA — and now mine — I can imagine their voices, though I know I will never speak to them.

I feel embarrassed to ask this, it seems so simple, but I'd like to know the answer...

When the letters first started arriving five

years ago, I'd feel a prick of excitement and dread at their unknowable contents. Facing the magnitude of another human seeking truth, I'd tell myself I could handle whatever was inside. A line from an Adrienne Rich poem would echo back to me: “The door itself makes no promises./ It is only a door.”

My mind is good at introducing stressful thoughts and my body is in constant pain and tension no matter my position.

Sometimes the questions are blessedly straightforward: *Is it possible to be gay and Buddhist?* Why yes, yes, it is! But then a stickier one arrives: *How do I handle violence in the yard without getting drawn in?* I'm never satisfied with my responses to these gritty koans — paradoxical riddles — of prison life. And yet, I have to respond to their words somehow.

I miss the color blue, the sky.

Because I travel often for work, I carry these letters with me on trips. My freedom to move in the world is most poignant when I am holding the words of a man who does not see sunlight regularly. I sit with the knowledge that my words on the page, the only thing I have to offer, can never undo this fact.

I want to help other prisoners as much as I can, when I can.

I am often humbled by the prisoners' sincerity and their deep motivation to practice. Sometimes, it seems like they write solely to remind me of everything I take for granted. It is not that they complain about their lives, but just describing them taps my awareness of everything they don't have, and everything I do.

How can I find the stillness to have a peaceful day?

These are men who awaken in pre-dawn darkness to sit alone in silence before the clanging, clattering madness of the ward begins. They share their sorrows, their suffering, and how they try to live good lives in impossible circumstances. I see great determination in this, but steep odds.

It all seems so hopeless, and then another letter arrives:

Thank you for writing. I was relapsing into bad choices, but your words were enough to shake me out of it.

The path is always right in front of me; the door is only a door. Open my laptop, answer the next letter as best I can, send it out into the world.

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